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Violent Video Games - Psychologists Help Protect Children from Harmful Effects

Psychological research confirms that violent video games can increase children's aggression, but that parents moderate the negative effects.

[Glossary of Psychological Terms](#)

Findings

Fifty years' of research on violent television and movies has shown that there are several negative effects of watching such fare (see <http://www.psychologymatters.org/mediaviolence.html>). Because video games are a newer medium, there is less research on them than there is on TV and movies. However, studies by psychologists such as Douglas Gentile, PhD, and Craig Anderson, PhD, indicate it is likely that violent video games may have even stronger effects on children's aggression because (1) the games are highly engaging and interactive, (2) the games reward violent behavior, and because (3) children repeat these behaviors over and over as they play (Gentile & Anderson, 2003). Psychologists know that each of these help learning - active involvement improves learning, rewards increase learning, and repeating something over and over increases learning.

Drs. Anderson and Gentile's research shows that children are spending increasing amounts of time playing video games - 13 hours per week for boys, on average, and 5 hours per week for girls (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, under review; Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004). A 2001 content analyses by the research organization Children Now shows that a majority of video games include violence, about half of which would result in serious injuries or death in the 'real' world. Children often say their favorite video games are violent. What is the result of all this video game mayhem?

Dr. Anderson and colleagues have shown that playing a lot of violent video games is related to having more aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). Furthermore, playing violent games is also related to children being less willing to be caring and helpful towards their peers. Importantly, research has shown that these effects happen just as much for non-aggressive children as they do for children who already have aggressive tendencies (Anderson et al., under review; Gentile et al., 2004).

Parents have an important role to play. Psychologists have found that when parents limit the amount of time as well as the types of games their children play, children are less likely to show aggressive behaviors (Anderson et al., under review; Gentile et al., 2004). Other research suggests that active parental involvement in children's media usage-including discussing the inappropriateness of violent solutions to real

life conflicts, reducing time spent on violent media, and generating alternative nonviolent solutions to problems—all can reduce the impact of media violence on children and youth (Anderson et al., 2003).

Significance

Children spend a great deal of time with violent video games at exactly the ages that they should be learning healthy ways to relate to other people and to resolve conflicts peacefully. Because video games are such good teachers, it is critical to help parents, educators, and policy-makers understand how to maximize their benefits while minimizing potential harms.

Practical Application

In 1993, the video game industry began putting ratings on video games (E for 'everyone,' T for 'teen,' and M for 'mature'). Psychologists such as David Walsh, PhD, have conducted research on how useful the ratings are and how easily children can purchase mature-rated video games (e.g., Walsh & Gentile, 2002; see http://www.mediafamily.org/research/report_vgrc_index.shtml to see annual results). This research has caused the video game industry to improve its ratings systems and to improve its policies regarding marketing mature video games to children.

Research has shown both the deleterious effects of violent video games on children and the ease with which children can purchase mature-rated games (e.g., FTC, 2003). These combined types of studies have influenced several major retail stores (e.g., Sears, Target, Walmart) to create policies preventing children under 17 from buying mature-rated video games. Researchers are continuing to study how effectively stores enforce such policies.

Some researchers have created school curricula to help teach children to reduce their total amount of screen time and/or the types of programs and games watched/played. Although the research is still limited, these curricula show many positive effects, such as a reduction of aggressive behaviors on school playgrounds (Robinson et al., 2001).

Some cities, states, and countries have considered legislation preventing the sale of mature-rated video games to children (similar to laws preventing the sale of tobacco to children). Also, Dr. Anderson is among the psychologists helping policy-makers to understand the problems that violent video games can pose for children's healthy outcomes. (see his testimony before Congress <http://www.psychology.iastate.edu/faculty/caa/abstracts/2000-2004/00Senate.html>). In addition, numerous child advocacy and parent support groups have incorporated video game research findings into their web sites and educational materials. Examples include [National Institute on Media and the Family](#), [Lion and Lamb project](#), [Young Media Australia](#), [Children Now](#), [Center for Successful Parenting](#), [Action Coalition for Media Education](#), and [Victorian Parenting Centre](#).

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Additional Sources

APA Public Information Brochure:

[Violence on Television: What do Children Learn? What Can Parents Do?](#)

National Institute on Media and the Family:

[Fact sheets on the effects of media on children and families](#)

[Annual MediaWise Video Game Report Cards](#)

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Violence in the Media - Psychologists Help Protect Children from Harmful Effects

Decades of psychological research confirms that media violence can increase aggression.

[Glossary of Psychological Terms](#)

Findings

Virtually since the dawn of television, parents, teachers, legislators, and mental health professionals have been concerned about the content of television programs and its impact, particularly on children. Of special concern has been the portrayal of violence, especially given psychologist Albert Bandura's work on social learning and the tendency of children to imitate what they see (see <http://www.psychologymatters.org/bandura2.html>). As a result of 15 years of consistently disturbing findings about the violent content of children's programs, the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior was formed in 1969 to assess the impact of violence on the attitudes, values and behavior of viewers. The resulting Surgeon General's report and a follow-up report in 1982 by the National Institute of Mental Health identify these major effects of seeing violence on television:

- Children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others
- Children may be more fearful of the world around them
- Children may be more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others

Research by psychologists L. Rowell Huesmann, Leonard Eron and others found that children who watched many hours of violence on television when they were in elementary school tended to also show a higher level of aggressive behavior when they became teenagers. By observing these youngsters into adulthood, Drs. Huesmann and Eron found that the ones who'd watched a lot of TV violence when they were eight years old were more likely to be arrested and prosecuted for criminal acts as adults. Interestingly, being aggressive as a child did not predict watching more violent TV as a teenager, suggesting that TV watching may more often be a cause rather than a consequence of aggressive behavior.

Violent video games are a more recent phenomenon; therefore there is less research on their effects. However, research by psychologist Craig A. Anderson and others shows that playing violent video games can increase a person's aggressive thoughts, feelings and behavior both in laboratory settings and in actual life. In fact, a study by Dr. Anderson in 2000 suggests that violent video games may be more harmful than violent television and movies because they are

interactive, very engrossing and require the player to identify with the aggressor.

Dr. Anderson and other researchers are also looking into how violent music lyrics affect children and adults. In a 2003 study involving college students, Anderson found that songs with violent lyrics increased aggression related thoughts and emotions and this effect was directly related to the violent content of the lyrics. "One major conclusion from this and other research on violent entertainment media is that content matters," says Anderson. "This message is important for all consumers, but especially for parents of children and adolescents."

Significance

With the research clearly showing that watching violent TV programs can lead to aggressive behavior, The American Psychological Association passed a resolution in 1985 informing broadcasters and the public of the potential dangers that viewing violence on television can have for children. In 1992, the APA's Task Force on Television and Society published a report that further confirmed the link between TV violence and aggression.

Practical Application

In 1990, Congress passed the Children's Television Act (CTA), which outlined new regulations for commercial broadcast stations. As a result of the CTA (which was updated in 1996), stations are required to air at least three hours of programming "that furthers the education and informational needs of children 16 years and under in any respect, including children's intellectual/cognitive or social/emotional needs." These programs must be labeled with the designation "E/I" and have clearly stated, written educational objectives. These educational programs generally contain both direct and indirect messages fostering cooperation and compassion rather than aggression. Parents now have positive options when it comes to choosing TV programs for their children. Research on television and violence has also led to the development of content-based rating systems that allow parents to make judgments about the programs' content before allowing their children to watch a show.

Besides warning of the harmful effects of violent media content, psychology has a strong history of bringing out the best in television. For example, Daniel R. Anderson, a professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts, has worked with producers of children's programs like Sesame Street and Captain Kangaroo to help TV shows educate children.

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Additional Sources

APA Public Information Brochure:

[Violence on Television: What do Children Learn? What Can Parents Do?](#)

APA press release:

[Childhood exposure to media violence predicts young adult aggressive behavior, according to a new 15-year study](#)

[APA Policy Statement on television violence](#)

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